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Emily's Bed

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MOLLY McQUADE

EMILY'S BED

*Ample make this Bed,
Make this Bed with Awe –
In it, wait till Judgment Break
Excellent, and Fair –*

*Be it's Mattrass straight –
Be it's Pillow round –
Let no Sunrise' Yellow noise
Interrupt this ground –*

—Emily Dickinson

Dear Emily D.,

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Your bed is the same as my bed, almost.

You and I are out of fashion. We both prefer small beds.

Most beds of my time now sweep the floorboards in homes and showrooms, wooing the diameters. Even if they are just plywood, with foam-rubber stomachs like dirty sheep, they crave epic square footage, acres of sunlight. In an age of despair, however covert, vast must be right.

This winter, I have been trying to choose my first bed, so I am aware of the vanities.

I come late to beds. All of my contemporaries have already owned a few too many, one after another, one at a time. They ply their lives with beds. (Picture a reunion of the hardwood.) They linger by a headboard; they palm the sheets, taking a thread count. They love love. They love sleep.

You and I are different, I'm supposing; we don't. And also, we are not the same. Your bed is still here, though you aren't. But you lay in it for a long time. You were a loyalist.

I am not. My beds have all been improvised, received or handed down, before they were banished. Not purchased. Not chosen. Those were the beds of a doubter, uncomfy, half-finished, with splintery slats shifting rudely below an uneasy mattress.

My history is that of someone who doesn't want a bed to lie in. Beds can make life better, I suppose. Yet my beds haven't done that for me. I like to dodge them, switch them, deny them a rightful space.

For a year in Minnesota, I slept on the floor. Well, not really; a quarter inch of something stupid cringed under me, army-drab and itching. My back liked it, for some reason. In the endless, duplicitous goosedown of a town both cold and smug, I needed something *not* soft. I got it. Then I left.

From a rented bed in a furnished Chicago apartment, I slid like a rocket one night when Howard, now a Boston surgeon, launched his hairy hand at me. No, I didn't want anything, and I don't think even he did.

From that bed I was able to study a much bigger centipede than I had ever seen before, skittering high on the bedroom wall. Mrs. Skillman, my landlady, did not believe me, or did not believe in centipedes. Too bad.

Later, for another life, I bought a futon. Alan got it for me. He knew all about them. Laughing lightheartedly, he carried it out of the warehouse on his head.

Years later, weary of its narrowness, I gave the futon—I did not care to sell it—to my onetime pal Elizabeth and her boyfriend, who was willing to give her almost anything. Not long after, a new boyfriend sat on it, crushing the frame with his Welsh heft. When she left him, she also left the futon.

I have lain on a lot of ugly beds, because it was convenient. They were lumps of lumber, squared. Recently, however, I summoned the will to shop for a new bed. For once, I'd choose it. I could buy it. I had the space.

But I have not done it yet.

Why not? I've looked at lots and lots of beds.

The gaggle of beds sashays, online, at an art deco website situated in the north of England. They saunter to the Upper East Side of Manhattan, where the most enchanting beds seem to live, costing more than ten times what they should: a Biedermeier sleigh bed, studded with mother-of-pearl floral inlay; an art nouveau bed, swaying with a rhythm that I could not ever name. And so on.

I'm reasonably disciplined. I won't buy just any bed.

I can tell you that newish, artisanal, American beds all seem to come from small towns in Ohio. They creak into view like dotty renegades, however gracefully designed. These beds are eccentrics, no matter what the luxury of their grain. For instance, the best new bed from Ohio to enter my eyespan,

costing \$3,000, looked to me like a tipsy samurai. Elegant. Fierce. Impishly demented. I certainly liked it.

But was the fellow for me?

New sleigh beds litter Manhattan showrooms, gloomy and expansive, like biers for families of Dobermans. I'm not pro-burial. I'd rather burn.

So I had a few misgivings when I found a partly disassembled nineteenth-century sleigh bed bundled up in ignominy in a shop without a name or a street number in Brooklyn. Flame mahogany, book-matched! Though it looked abandoned, I thought this might just be the one for me.

I may yet buy it. I've put down a deposit. But I suspect that it's not to be, either.

What I think I want: a colossally jaunty 1920s American art deco skyscraper-style bed in bird's-eye maple. Low, swelling, gallant, open-armed. Unlike me.

But where will I find it? When will my bed come to me?

Beds waylay me, Emily, rather like yourself. A writer's bed evokes the writer, to me. Beds of writers seem revealing, even though writers may or may not write in bed. Why, then, do their beds tell me something?

Maybe it is because while the body sleeps, the mind roams and plays. A bed is where the mind of a writer finds itself, or finds what happiness it can.

Other writers might well disagree with me about the bed as our true home. In fact, I find myself best on foot, not when prone. But even so, I pine to study the beds and bedrooms of many writers' minds at their liberty.

Those beds: the size, the style, the *style*; how the light strained or eased from the window. The contained geometry of the writer's bed as it occupies the greater room. Better yet, I could try out the bed, not just look. If that seemed too lascivious, then my eyes alone could do the work.

A book of beds of writers might find a warmly appreciative circle of readers, thinks the editor in me. Or a book documenting and depicting the beds of the mighty, mighty for whatever reasons.

How we rest, and what we rest upon, must help somehow to explain us.

Your nineteenth-century bed at home in Massachusetts, Emily, is very like my own intended, the bed I'll probably marry, if only for a time: yes, the flame-mahogany Brooklyn sleigh item. Yours, too, is a dark sleigh bed, shockingly small, although less sinuous and more upright than mine. Your headboard and footboard are emphatically, vertically Puritan, not unlike the bolting moral boldness of your writing. By contrast, my bed looks worldly,

mastering, Victorian, even a bit coy by comparison; confident, consuming, seductive.

Regardless, your bed matters, and not only to me. According to what I have read, an eminent poet of my day, when pregnant with her first and only child, visited your bedroom, now preserved as one room of a well-known museum, and furtively touched her belly to your bed sacramentally while the tour guide was distracted. Then she named her child Emily.

Her move has always struck me as a tad too discreetly reverential.

I'd rather just go to bed with you.

But how, exactly?

Ever yrs,
Molly M.